

## IMAGINING SIBERIA

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# Student Reviews of Books About Siberia

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## Notes From the House of the Dead

*Notes from the House of the Dead*, Trans. James Scanlon or *Notes from a Dead House*, Trans. R. Pevear et. al.

Review by Takuma Warren

### Background

The novel *Notes from the House of the Dead* is one of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's great works, and yet it is not the first one that comes to mind for many people. However, readers can expect Dostoyevsky's writing style of moral questioning and struggle to understand human behavior along with a freshness that is specific to this book. Fans of Dostoyevsky can enjoy this book as a sort of origin story to his coveted style and because the book is semi-autobiographical, readers are given a glimpse into his incredible mind. For those who have never read a Dostoyevsky book, fear not. It may be daunting to start with the 840-page *Brothers Karamazov* or the nearly 600-page *Crime and Punishment*, in which case this comparatively short book of 368 pages is a great place to start without having to compromise the depth of his analysis.

### Synopsis

A narrator, by the name of Alexander Petrovitch Goryanchikov, is sent to a Siberian prison camp

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experienced. Through Petrovitch, Dostoyevsky gives us a peek inside the labor camps and shows us both the brutality of the czarist system, but also creates a literary preamble to what would later be *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Petrovitch encounters many prisoners, all of which accurately project the life inside the labor camps (as well as the broader Russia which encompasses it) and many of the characters are true to life people which Dostoyevsky himself encountered in prison. Thus, the book can also be read as a psychological case study, in which readers can analyze the effects that grief, hunger, and hard labor can have on a man's mind, body, and soul.

### Analysis

Pretty much right out of the gate, Dostoyevsky shows what makes him a great writer in the second chapter of the book. This is the first chapter in which we get to see the prison and of course his writing makes it possible for us to experience the grimness of the prison as the protagonist Petrovitch does. However, he also gives us snapshot stories which are rarely more than a paragraph, in which he tells the story about his fellow inmates. One example is this story about a man who loses his wife to another man while in prison.

"I also remember one evening, a prisoner, who had been formerly a well-to-do Siberian peasant. Six years before he had had news of his wife's remarrying, which had caused him great pain. That very evening she had come to the prison, and had asked for him in order to make him a present! They talked together for two minutes, wept together, and then separated never to meet again. I saw the expression of this prisoner's countenance when he re-entered the barracks. There, indeed, one learns to support everything" (p. 9)

This story could have been quickly told in the way I had just summarized, or it could have droned on for quite some time. However, it is allocated the perfect amount of time to explain the

situation fully while expressing the bluntness of reality. There is not an infinite amount of time

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immeasurable pain and then extrapolating out towards the prison as a whole we can see the total amount of suffering experienced in the prison.

All of this culminates into incredible world building, which creates the right mood while giving the reader enough information so that they can picture exactly what they are reading. In this way Dostoyevsky can challenge the reader both emotionally and intellectually which is the perfect combination for reflection.

In the last chapter of the first act, Dostoyevsky tells a story about a play, which the story has been ramping up to for a few chapters (p.171-193). It is a moment of relief among all the pain, and in many ways all of these initial chapters depict moments of relief among situations of sorrow. There are so many contrasts taking place all at once and the difference between joy and despair is being rather arbitrarily held in the hands of the Major, who can (and has in the past) call off the play at any moment. The idea of doing a performance, which is to play a role, is extremely metaphorical given the roles that the prisoners are expected to play in their daily lives. However, there is a freedom to the way the prisoners can act on stage and in a strange way the prisoners are most free during this time. The tension between the dull never-ending cycle of prison life and this essentially spontaneous event, which brings joy and laughter, burns through to the forefront of this chapter. As the climax of the first act, part 1 ends in a small victory; a momentary respite from all the suffering. In the following chapter, Alexander goes to the hospital ward and the story, as a whole, moves from the introduction of characters to stories of suffering. This is important because after the performance the characters are maximumly humanized, which makes their subhuman treatment all the more jarring.

## Evaluation

What makes this book especially great is the organization of the story. Many Russian books are broken up into sections, which is a literary form that can be effectively used by good writers to enhance the meaning of the work as a whole. Dostoyevsky breaks this book up into two parts, with the topic of the first being hope, and the second being despair. Through these two

contrasting topics, a theme is born, as Dostoyevsky argues that in a place like a Siberian prison

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must carry until you die.

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To call it a masterpiece would not be incorrect, but that statement would not come without its own share of disagreement. Some critics find that Notes from the house of the dead lacks the typical Dostoyevsky flair, which they are used to from reading his other great works. It is, after all, the first book that he wrote in his signature style. However, many agree that it is a great book to strengthen the string of Dostoyevsky ideas which are present within his many works. It is great as a first encounter to Dostoyevsky, but even if you're like me and read Notes from the House of the Dead first because it is welcomingly short, there is still a lot to be gained from this book. I found this book to be very versatile in that it can be enjoyed on its own, but it can also be enjoyed along with Dostoyevsky's other works and even with the work of great writers like Tolstoy, who said that this was the only book he revered.

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